

As Israel bombs Gaza, Ireland's enduring support of Palestine gets stronger

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A man walks past a mural in solidarity with Palestinians in Gaza, amid the ongoing conflict between Israel and Hamas, in the Nationalist area along the International Wall on the Falls Road in Belfast, Northern Ireland, November 4, 2023. REUTERS/Clodagh Kilcoyne

Dublin, November 18 (RHC)-- Ireland is once again an outlier in the West, home to some of the loudest criticism of Israel and support of Palestinian rights, as the Middle East conflict rages. After Hamas launched an assault in Israel on October 7, Irish Prime Minister Leo Varadkar decried the deadly incursion, during which about 1,200 people were killed and 240 were taken captive.

But less than a week later, he became one of the few European officials to raise alarm. "Israel doesn't have the right to do wrong," he said in something of a play on words as most European leaders were stressing Israel's "right" to self-defence during its bombing campaign on Gaza, the enclave ruled by Hamas. In just 41 days of war, more than 11,400 Palestinians have been killed by Israel.

Varadkar has also said Israel's bombardment "amounts to collective punishment", which is prohibited under the Geneva Conventions. Michael D Higgins, the 82-year-old Irish president whose role is largely ceremonial, said European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen was "not speaking for Ireland" when she expressed unconditional support for Israel on October 16 without acknowledging the ongoing occupation of Palestinian lands.

Irish Defence and Foreign Affairs Minister Micheal Martin looks at a map of the Gaza Strip during a meeting with Palestinian Prime Minister Mohammad Shtayyeh in Ramallah, amid the ongoing battles between Israel and the Palestinian group Hamas, November 16, 2023. ZAIN JAAFAR/Pool via REUTERS

After Israel began striking Gaza, Ireland, a member of the European Union, was one of the first countries to call for an "immediate humanitarian ceasefire" to meet the "urgent" needs of civilians.

Niamh Nichillín – a 50-year-old primary school teacher in Tipperary and a member of Fianna Fail, one of two governing centre-right parties – is among the many in Ireland who sympathise with the people of Gaza, one of the world's most densely populated areas often described as an open-air prison due to Israel's blockade of the enclave.

"Israeli air strikes on Gaza are clearly disproportionate towards a civilian population with little or no defenses," she told Al Jazeera. "This can hardly be called a war in the usual sense of the word."

Statements by Israeli officials indicate they are motivated by a "desire for the destruction of Gaza", she said. "This is unacceptable."

On October 18, Ireland announced an additional 13 million-euro (\$14m) package of humanitarian funding for Palestinians, lifting the 2023 total to 29 million euros (\$31.5m) with the foreign ministry saying it was aware the unfolding situation in Gaza is a "humanitarian catastrophe of unprecedented magnitude".

"I would like the Irish people to continue to use their influence to ensure that there is a ceasefire, an end to the siege and that enough humanitarian aid is getting through," said Nichillín, who welcomed the news of extra aid.

In 1980, Ireland was the first EU country to call for the establishment of a Palestinian state. Thirteen years later, it became the last member of the bloc to open an Israeli embassy in Dublin.

In 2018, Ireland drew worldwide attention when independent politician Frances Black proposed the Occupied Territories Bill, which would have banned and criminalised trading goods and services from lands occupied by Israel.

Although it enjoyed support across the political spectrum and the public, it was removed from the government's programme during coalition negotiations in 2020 between the two ruling parties, Fianna Fail and Fine Gael.

In 2021, Ireland became the first EU country to declare that Israel was involved in the "de-facto annexation" of Palestinian land, upsetting Israel's foreign ministry, which said the move "constitutes a

victory for extremist Palestinian factions”.

“Ireland’s own history of colonisation by the British has made many Irish people empathetic towards other nations under occupation or colonisation,” said Cathal O’hEanna, a representative of the left-wing nationalist party Sinn Fein.

“Our centuries-long struggle for the right to self-determination resonates with the Palestinian struggle for statehood and independence,” he told Al Jazeera.

John Lyndon, executive director of the Alliance for Middle East Peace, said, “At first there was Irish solidarity with Jews in Mandate Palestine and then early Israel because they were seen as fighting British colonialism, using some of the same paramilitary tactics as the IRA. And some also had an affinity with the kibbutz movement and the socialist ideals of early Israel.”

“However, after Israel started expanding settlements on Palestinian territory following the 1967 Arab-Israeli War, Irish allegiance switched towards the Palestinian cause,” he added.

Today, as the war escalates, pro-Palestine protests continue throughout the country. On Wednesday evening, more than 1,000 people rallied outside the lower house in Dublin as a motion to expel Israeli Ambassador Dana Erlich, who has accused Higgins of “spreading misinformation” about the Israel-Hamas war, was being voted on.

The motion – which was put forward by the Social Democrats and supported by Sinn Fein and the Trotskyist People before Profit party – was defeated. Another motion tabled by Sinn Fein calling on Ireland to refer Israel to the International Criminal Court was also defeated.

Celebrated Irish writers are also organising. Authors including Sally Rooney, Sinead Gleeson, Donal Ryan and Colin Barrett are participating in four Irish Writers for Palestine events from November 28.

“Writers, especially in Ireland, occupy a certain cultural position, and we hope to use that position to do what we can to show our solidarity,” said Michael Magee, one of the organisers. “Voices sympathetic to the Palestinian struggle, both within Israel and across Europe and the US, are facing more marginalisation and violent suppression than ever.”

Lyndon said that although he understands his fellow citizens, he feels that it is “important to be careful” about how solidarity with the Palestinian cause is expressed.

“The [October 7 attacks] triggered memories of the Holocaust for the Israeli side while the Palestinians now feel that they are reliving the Nakba. I’d like to see more solidarity with Palestinians and Israelis working together to end the occupation and ensure self-determination for each rather than one side fighting the other.”

Lyndon tragically lost a friend, the longtime advocate for Palestinian rights Vivian Silver, in the Hamas attacks.

Ireland should position itself as a peace negotiator, he said, because it has its “own history with conflict resolution” through its efforts to bring about the Good Friday Agreement. That Ireland “does not have the same ‘colonial baggage’ as other EU countries” would reassure Palestinians if the country were present in any negotiations.

“Ireland’s relationship with the US is also very good, so I would like to see Ireland use those strengths to play a better diplomatic role [in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict],” said Lyndon.

While Irish citizens of the Republic of Ireland overwhelmingly support the Palestinian cause, the picture is different in Northern Ireland, where people endured 30 years of violence known as the Troubles between

nationalists and unionists. That conflict largely came to an end with the signing of the Good Friday Agreement in 1998.

Opinions on the Middle East are divided along sectarian lines to a degree with Palestinian flags a common feature in the nationalist neighbourhoods of Belfast and Israeli flags in the unionist areas.

While these flags have long flown, more have appeared since the start of the Israel-Hamas war.

Amr Hashad, an activist in Belfast, said he sees similarities between the nationalist struggle in Northern Ireland for independence from the UK, which led to the emergence of the Provisional Irish Republican Army (Provos) in 1969 following widespread violence against the Catholic community, and Hamas, which was founded in 1987 at the start of the first Palestinian intifada, or uprising.

However, after the Provos launched an attack in London in 1995, “the British government and the EU negotiated with this army and even asked US President Bill Clinton for help in doing so until they managed to find a solution to the conflict”, Hashad said.

“Today, we find ourselves in a similar situation to the Provos’ secret attack on London where Hamas attacked Israel and the entire Gaza Strip is being punished mercilessly as innocent women, children and the elderly are killed with the support of the West. The question I ask myself is: Why aren’t the West negotiating with Hamas like it did with the Provos?”

Soon after the October 7 attacks, Sinn Fein, in contrast with statements made by other Western governments and political parties, said that while it had “no plans to meet or engage” with Hamas, it would “not rule out meeting with or talking to anybody” as part of efforts to secure peace in the Middle East.

Ireland is not among the small minority of EU countries that officially recognises Palestine and, in line with the bloc’s position, considers Hamas a terrorist organisation. The Irish parliament put forward a motion in 2014, calling on the government to formally recognise its statehood, but the push remains in limbo.

Michael Martin, foreign minister, said in September that the government was preparing to recognise Palestine as an independent state.

Andrew Cottey, a professor at the University College Cork’s department of government and politics, said that despite the political and public support of Palestine, “whatever the rights or wrongs of recognising Palestine, it would put Ireland in a minority within the European Union” and “significantly at odds with the United States on this issue”.

“You can make an argument for recognising Palestine, but were Ireland to do that, would it have any substantive impact on the situation on the ground in Israel and Palestine? Probably not. And the kind of political cost for the Irish government would be to antagonise the United States and isolate itself within the European Union.”

Stephanie Nic Carthaig, a translator who believes Ireland should officially recognise Palestine, said she understands Cottey’s argument, but added: “Neoliberalism in Irish politics, servile attitudes to empire and influence from the US are behind this slowness to recognise Palestine.”

Irish composer Raymond Deane, co-founder of the Ireland-Palestine Solidarity Campaign, criticised his country’s position on numerous fronts.

“Ireland should disassociate itself from EU policy [on Israel and Palestine] from dealing exclusively with the Palestinian Authority, which has no real authority, and cease to repeat the ‘two-state solution’ ad nauseam,” he told Al Jazeera. He would also like to see Ireland put an arms embargo on Israel and witness the Occupied Territories Bill implemented.

While the Irish government has gone further in its condemnation of Israel than other EU countries, Nichillín, Deane and Nic Carthaig are not alone in wanting the Irish government to do more.

Mary Lou McDonald, president of Sinn Féin, has said recognising Palestinian statehood would top the foreign policy agenda should her party lead the government. Sinn Féin met with ambassadors from Arab countries this month to discuss Gaza and the need for “dialogue” to secure a just and lasting peace, including a “viable state of Palestine.”

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